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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 ASHGABAT 000793

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SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN SENDS FIRST PARTICIPANT TO CDC'S FIELD
EPIDEMIOLOGY TRAINING PROGRAM

11. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Not for public Internet.

12. (U) SUMMARY: After rejecting repeated invitations for participants since 2004, Turkmenistan sent its first-ever epidemiologist to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control & Prevention's (CDC) USAID-funded Field Epidemiology Training Program (FETP) in Kazakhstan. The participant from Turkmenistan, who was selected from candidates nominated by the Ministry of Healthcare and Medical Industry (MOHMI) and interviewed by CDC representatives, has already joined other Central Asian epidemiologists in a two-year training program that will prepare her to investigate and respond to infectious disease outbreaks upon her return. FETP participants are trained to perform epidemiological research and disease surveillance at an international standard, which will build the MOHMI's capacity to identify, respond to, and prevent future public health threats.
END SUMMARY.

PROGRAM ESTABLISHED TO TRAIN ELITE EPIDEMIOLOGISTS

13. (U) In 2003, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), with funding from USAID, launched the Field Epidemiology Training Program (FETP) in the Central Asian Republics. Through this program, CDC trains an elite cadre of epidemiologists selected from each country's Ministry of Health to investigate and respond to infectious disease outbreaks in their respective countries. FETP graduates are trained to perform epidemiological research and disease surveillance at an international standard, which builds the capacities of Ministries of Health to identify, respond to, and prevent future public health threats.

14. (U) Based in Almaty, Kazakhstan, the FETP in Central Asia is most widely known for its recent work in identifying the cause of a pediatric HIV outbreak in Shymkent, Kazakhstan. The Shymkent investigation highlighted the FETP's added value to Kazakhstan's Ministry of Health. Although the Government of Kazakhstan considered this outbreak an extremely sensitive topic, CDC's successful FETP gained the trust of a government that normally keeps a watchful eye on foreign entities and the United States government. Led by CDC, Kazakhstani FETP students investigated the problem in a

discreet manner and produced scientifically-based data that was used to plan a course of action.

TURKMENISTAN REJECTED PREVIOUS OPPORTUNITIES TO PARTICIPATE

15. (U) Beginning in fall of 2004, USAID staff approached the Deputy Minister of Healthcare and Medical Industry on CDC's behalf to discuss the ministry's interest in participating in FETP. The Deputy Minister responded that Turkmenistan's government would permit related courses to be provided in country, but would not permit anyone to attend the program in Almaty. In 2005, following the appointment of a new deputy minister, USAID actually received participants' questionnaires for ten nominees, but at the last moment the government cancelled the qualifying exam. In 2006, CDC did not attempt to invite Turkmen participants due to its previous experiences and the December 2006 death of President Niyazov.

FOURTH TIME'S A CHARM -- OR PERSISTENCE PAYS OFF

16. (U) In December 2007, USAID forwarded CDC's invitation to participate in the FETP exam to the MOHMI. Although no response to the invitation had been received, with the deadline for candidate selection looming, USAID project management specialist Dr. Elena Samarkina began contacting various MOHMI officials in early May 2008 to promote this opportunity in light of President Berdimuhamedov's expressed desire for Turkmenistan's specialists to receive international training and experience. On May 8, Dr. Samarkina was told by MOHMI that the list of candidates was waiting for approval by the Cabinet of Ministers. On May 21, the day before CDC's representatives were scheduled to hold the candidate interviews and exams, Dr. Samarkina made a last-minute push to secure official approval. Calling directly both the Deputy Minister and ultimately,

ASHGABAT 00000793 002 OF 002

the Minister of Healthcare and Medical Industry, she persuaded them by suggesting that allowing the interviews to proceed -- even without Cabinet of Minister's approval -- would permit the MOHMI to determine the level of participants' knowledge of international standards on epidemiology. Based on the candidate's results, the Cabinet of Ministers then would be able to approve a candidate and potential alternates that had already demonstrated sufficient knowledge.

17. (U) On May 22, eighteen epidemiologists from across Turkmenistan took the exam, five of which were selected for interviews by CDC's Acting Regional Director Michael Schmoyer and the FETP Program Director Simon Ajeilat. One student was chosen to enter the program: Dr. Tachbiby Hojamuradova, a ministry employee in the Sanitary-Epidemiological Service from the city of Turkmenbashi. Over the next two years, Dr. Hojamuradova will participate in course modules in Almaty that last between two and ten weeks. Between training modules, she will return to Turkmenistan and serve in a reduced capacity at the MOHMI so that she can maintain her coursework. Upon her completion, she will be better prepared to support the ministry's efforts to identify, respond to, and prevent future public health threats.

18. (U) COMMENT: Dr. Hojamuradova's participation in this prestigious program marks a positive policy change in Turkmenistan. Consistent with President Berdimuhamedov's calls for students to access international experience and education, it also represents another small step toward increasing its interaction with its neighbors since she will study alongside epidemiologists from other Central Asian countries. For Turkmenistan to make up for its years of isolation and limited access to international standard in education, however, a much more ambitious program to train and retrain its specialists is needed. END COMMENT.

HOAGLAND